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# Begin Where I Am

## Kindergarten Geography

Chara Haeussler Bohan

Looking out the window of my house in central Texas, my five-year-old son saw a hill in the distance and asked, "Mommy, is that hill over there Africa?" His question caused me to chuckle. Probably, he had heard someone use the term Africa and he understood that Africa was far away. Clearly, he did not grasp exactly how distant the continent of Africa was from his home. Indeed, as NCSS notes in its position statement "Social Studies for Young Children," young learners are egocentric and have difficulty understanding spatial relationships.<sup>1</sup> To help young children improve their understanding of geography, therefore, how should educators address questions such as the one my son recently asked? There is more to say than a simple, "No."

### Solid Foundations

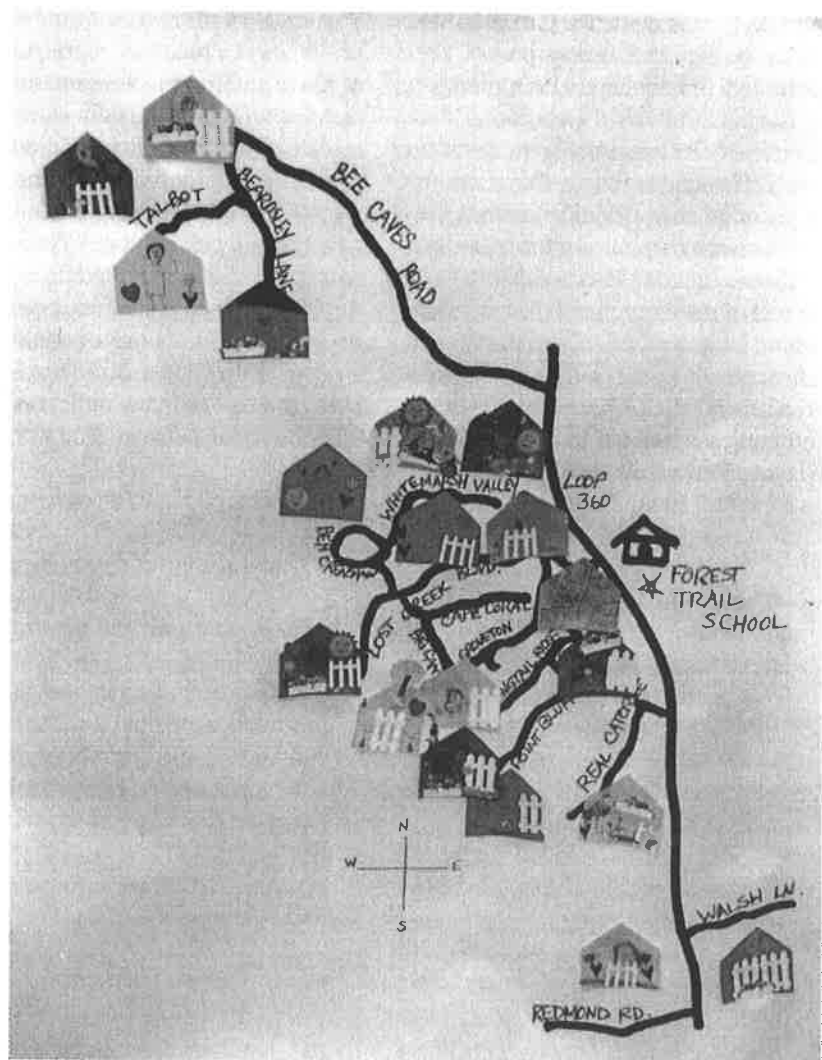
The developmental psychologist Jean Piaget postulated that children from the ages of two to seven exhibit "preoperational intelligence." Their egocentrism limits their thinking and restricts their ability to recognize multiple points of view and spatial arrangements.<sup>2</sup> In light of these difficulties, should teachers avoid geographical concepts entirely until children reach the concrete operational period (7 to 11 years) or advance to the formal operational stage (11 years onward)? Certainly, parents and teachers can, and should, teach basic geographical concepts to children of kindergarten age. While we should not demand that large-scale, concrete concepts (such as continents and nations) or abstract concepts (such as longitude and latitude) be learned by young children, building upon geographical features with which they are familiar can help provide the foundation for more advanced geographical concepts in later grades.

To foster understanding of geography by having children study the social world they know (themselves, their families, and their neighbors) follows the logic of the "expanding communities" curriculum sequence.<sup>3</sup> In this model, which Naylor and Diem have labeled the "de facto national curriculum," students begin by studying the world they know—that which they can experience directly for themselves.<sup>4</sup> Then, as children progress through the elementary grades, the focus of the social stud-

ies curriculum expands from the self and family to the neighborhood, community, state, nation, and finally, the world.

### All About Me

Typically, kindergarten students begin formal schooling by learning about themselves. In Texas, the state social studies curriculum guidelines state that the focus at the kindergarten level should be on "the self, home, family, and classroom."<sup>5</sup> At Forest Trail elementary school in Austin, Texas, I have helped implement the social studies component of a unit of study of kindergartners, "All About Me." In this unit, students learn about their worth as individuals, their uniqueness, and their differences and similarities with other class-



Where We Live

Julie Haislip's Kindergarten class, Forest Trail Elementary

mates. Teachers also help students to develop an awareness of their membership in the school, the grade levels of students, and the classroom environment. Students create pictures of themselves, their families, and their favorite foods, books, and activities. In one lesson, students engaged in a scavenger hunt around the school and searched for triangles, squares, rectangles, and circles (in the furniture, architecture, and natural surroundings of the school). At first glance, this activity appears to serve as a math lesson; but it also included geography skills and concepts, as students became more familiar with their school environment and how to navigate it.

The purpose of the kindergarten geography lesson, which was part of the unit "All About Me," was to help students learn basic mapping skills and geography concepts. I began the lesson by reading to students the book *Me on the Map* by Joan Sweeney, which provides a wonderful introduction to basic geographical concepts.<sup>6</sup> In the book, a young girl begins by introducing the reader to herself and describing her bedroom. Then she creates a drawing of the bedroom and places herself in it to demonstrate to students that a map is really a picture of a place or area. The story continues by building upon geographical concepts of home, street, town, state, and country. After reading the story to students, I asked them what a map was. Most students understood right away why people use maps. Responses included, "When you are lost, you can look at a map and it can tell you where to go." Or, "When you are driving, it can help you find where you are going." Many of the students probably had observed their parents using maps.

#### Neighborhood Image

To explore the topic of maps further, I created a poster size map of the streets where students lived. Although I could simply print out a map from the Internet, it was easier to trace the streets from an existing printed map onto a sheet of plain paper. I only wanted to draw the streets where students lived and the street where the school was located. Drawing by hand allowed me to simplify the information on the map and gave the final poster a more human, less mechanical, feel. With a large photocopier, I was able to enlarge the map to poster size. Next, each student was given pre-cut house shapes and instructed to draw a picture of himself or herself on the house and to decorate the house. Then each student walked up to the poster and glued the

house on the appropriate street. I assisted students with this task, asking each one, "What street do you live on?" Answers ranged from the name of a street, to that of a neighborhood, state, and country. These children had certainly heard a lot of geographical terms, although it was all so confusing to them! With a master list provided by the school office, I could help each student correctly place his or her home on the correct street on the map.

#### The World Beyond

I concluded the lesson by showing students Rand McNally's *First Atlas*.<sup>7</sup> The class discussed a few faraway places that students had some knowledge of, such as the North Pole, Australia (the location of the last Olympic Games), and even a distant continent—Africa!

Certainly, this kindergarten geography unit was an exciting learning experience for students and for me.<sup>8</sup> As we revisited and reinforced geographical concepts throughout the year, these initial lessons remained important as a foundation for geographical understanding. ■

#### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies, *Social Studies for Young Children* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1984); A Position Statement on the web at [www.socialstudies.org/standards/positions/young.html](http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/positions/young.html).
2. Marcy P. Driscoll, *Psychology of Learning for Instruction* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1994).
3. Jere Brophy and B. VanSledright, *Teaching and Learning History in Elementary Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); P. Hanna, "Revising the Social Studies: What is Needed?" *Social Education* 27, no. 4 (1963): 190-196.
4. D. Naylor and R. Diem, *Elementary and Middle School Social Studies* (New York: Random House, 1987).
5. Texas Education Agency Division of Curriculum and Assessment, *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Social Studies* (TEKS) (Austin, TX: TEA, 1998): §113.2. On the web at [www.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/ch113html#s1131](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/ch113html#s1131).
6. J. Sweeney, *Me on the Map* (New York: Scholastic, 1996).
7. *First Atlas* (Leicester, UK: Rand McNally, 1993).
8. I would like to thank teacher Julie Haislip for providing the mapping example used to illustrate this article.

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